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Relative status of furbearer species in Manitoba's registered trapline area determined through questionnaire analysis 1988-89.

By Johnson, C.S. 1989.

Manitoba
Natural Resources
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Biological Services

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Manitoba
Department of Natural Resources
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ABSTRACT

The second year of a questionnaire to gather furbearer population information from registered trapline (RTL) trappers was implemented in the 1988/89 trapping season. Twelve areas had high or acceptable response rates. There were 444 respondents (15% of RTL trappers) representing 278 traplines (32% of lines) and 29 trapline sections (66% of RTL sections). All species populations remained stable with virtually no changes in level from the previous year except for red squirrel (Tamaisciuris hudsonicus) which increased. Some species populations were essentially absent from the RTL area, some were low but most were common. Population estimates for lynx (Lynx canadensis) and wolverine (Gulo gulo) were compared with estimates gained through other methods.

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INTRODUCTION

The lack of and difficulty in collecting field information on furbearer populations and trends in Manitoba prompted the initiation of a questionnaire administered to Registered Trapline (RTL) trappers in 1987-88. The ideal time to administer it was after trappers had surveyed or begun trapping their lines.

The pilot study, based on a program already in existence in the Yukon (pers. comm., B. Slough, Fur Biologist, Yukon Department of Natural Resources) was carried out in the 1987-88 trapping season to determine whether a large number of trappers or traplines could be surveyed and if the information returned was reliable and useful, ie., not exaggerated to influence season or quota setting (Johnson 1988). It was concluded that this type of program is useful and the information is reliable as an index. In the 1988-89 trapping season this project was attempted again to get an indication of any changes in furbearer population levels as well as determine the effectiveness and reception of questionnaires on an annual basis.

METHODS:

In November 1988, questionnaires (Appendix I) addressed to each trapper as listed in the 1987-88 trapper file were given or sent to 13 of 14 Trapline Officers (TLO) in different registered trapline areas of the province (Fig. 1), after trapping was well underway. A supply of blank ones was included for new trappers. TLOs were to interview at least one trapper per trapline and complete a form with them. They were also to fill one out themselves with their knowledge of the area and return the completed forms. In addition an article explaining the project and a tear-out questionnaire

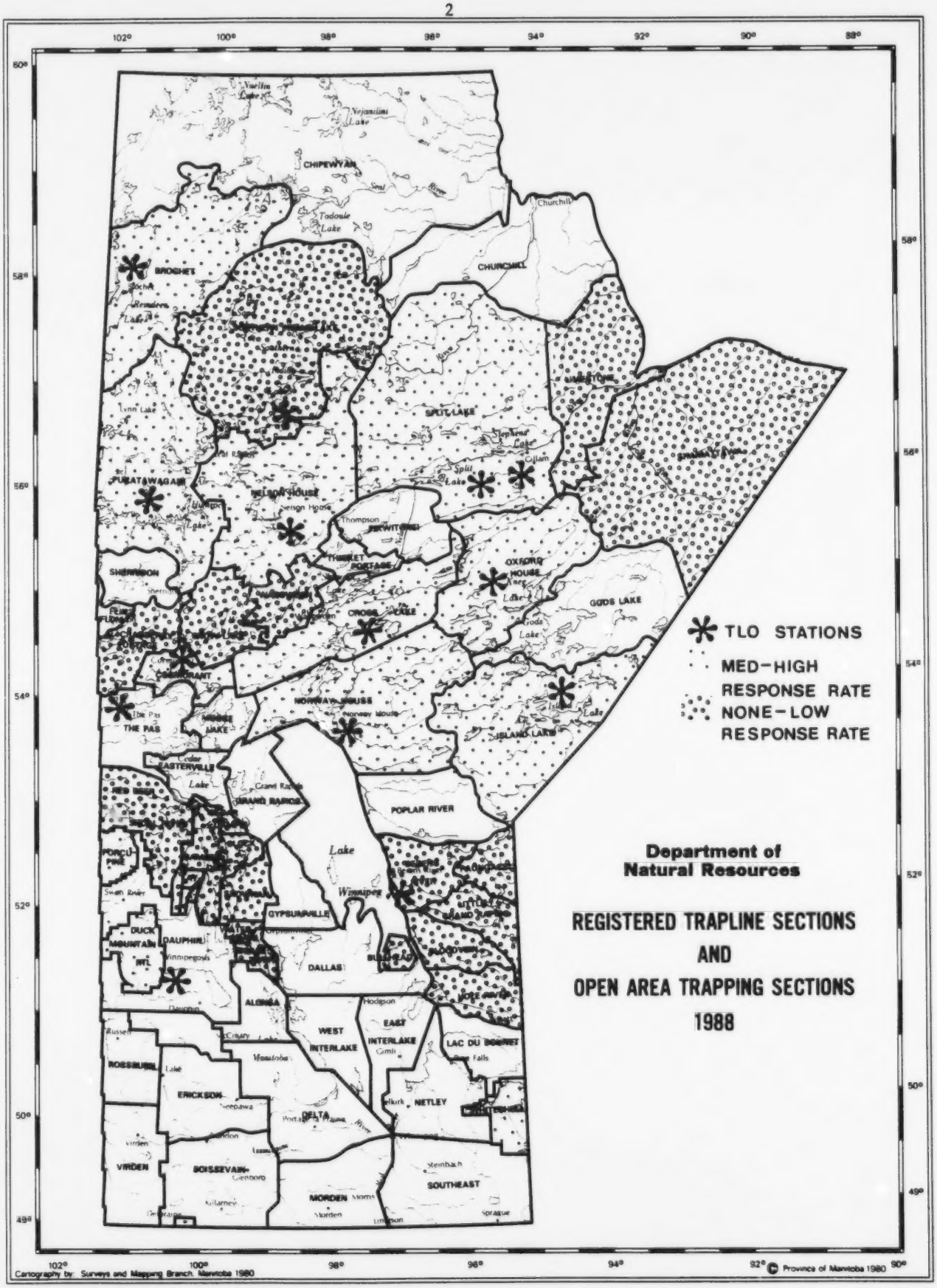

Fig. 1: Trapline questionnaire sampling areas and response rates.

were included in the fall 1988 issue of the Manitoba Trappers Association magazine. Since the number of respondents to this method were small in number and largely Open Area trappers, these results are not presented here. Tallies for each trapline section and total sample were done. Classes and relative values/class were arbitrarily set using the following scale.

Abundant(High) - 3 points
Common - 2 points
Scarce (Low) - 1 point
Not Present - 0 points

More than last year - 1 point
Same as last year - 0 points
Less than last year - -1 point

The number of respondents for each category was used to calculate the average overall estimate for each section and the RTL area. The averages were classified as they fell into the following categories.

0 - .5 - Not Present
.6 - 1.5 - Scarce (Low)
1.6 - 2.5 - Common
2.6 - 3.0 - Abundant (High)

< -.4 - Less than last year
.4> > -.4 - Same as last year
> .4 - More than last year

The boundary value for classifying the population level changes of each species changed from -.5 and .5 used in 1987-88 to -.4 and .4. When comparing the two years' of data, the indication of changes from one year to the next better coincided with the resulting population level results in 1989 when the category boundaries were set at .4 and -.4.

The number of lynx and wolverine taken by respondents was tallied as well as estimates of the number of these two species still remaining on the trapline. An estimate of the total RTL harvest and the population numbers was extrapolated using the total number of RTLs occurring in the province.

A question about black bear (Ursus americanus) trapping (Appendix I) was added to determine an estimate of the number of trappers that actively trapped bear and the methods used. This information was intended to be used to determine whether proposed changes in legislation on trapping devices will have a serious impact on these trappers.

RESULTS

A total of 487 questionnaires were returned but only 444 contained usable data. This added up to 444 respondents out of an average potential of 2890 (4 yr. avg.). These respondents represented 278 of 876 traplines including seven fur blocks (each block was considered as one line). This broke down to 32% of the lines being sampled and approximately 15% of RTL trappers. Twenty-nine of 44 trapline sections (66% of sections) were represented (Fig.1). One section, Brochet, returned questionnaires for 100% of the lines.

Overall, red squirrel was the only species considered abundant (Table 1). Badger (Taxidea taxus), arctic (white) fox (Alopex lagopus) and raccoon (Procyon lotor) populations were essentially absent from the RTL area or had extremely low population levels as most sections were outside the range of these species. Coyote (Canis latrans), fisher (Martes pennanti), lynx, marten (Martes americana), wolf (Canis lupus) and wolverine had low population levels although there were variations between sections. Beaver (Castor canadensis), black bear, ermine (Mustela erminea, M. frenata), red fox (Vulpes vulpes), mink (Mustela vison), muskrat (Ondatra zibethicus) and otter (Lutra canadensis)

Table 1: Status of furbearer populations for selected trapline sections 1988/89.

Section	RTL	WHITESHELL	NORWAY HOUSE	ISLAND LAKE	TURTLE MTN.	DUCK MTN.	PORCUPINE	CORMORANT	CROSS LAKE
N	444	10	24	37	6	21	7	11	21
# LINES RESPONDED	278	7	14	21	6	17	6	8	14
TOTAL # LINES	876	25	41	42	10	28	15	10	61
SPECIES									
BADGER	N*	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
BEAVER	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	C
BLACK BEAR	C	C	A	C	N	L	L	L	L
COYOTE	L	L	N	N	C	L	L	L	L
ERMINE	C	C	A	C	L	C	C	C	C
FISHER	L	C	C	C	N	N	N	L	C
RED FOX	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	C
ARCTIC FOX	N	N	L	L	N	N	N	N	L
LYNX	L	L	C	C	N	N	N	N	L
MARTEN	L	L	L	C	N	C	C	N	N
MINK	C	C	C	C	C	L	C	C	C
MUSKRAT	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	L	C
OTTER	C	C	C	C	N	N	N	L	C
RACCOON	N	L	N	N	C	N	N	N	L
SQUIRREL	A	C	A	A	C	C	L	A	C
WOLF	L	C	L	L	L	L	L	C	C
WOLVERINE	L	N	L	L	N	N	N	L	N
HARE	C	C	A	A	L	C	C	A	C
MICE	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	A	C
GROUSE	C	A	C	A	L	C	C	L	L

Table 1 cont'd

Section	RTL	OXFORD HOUSE	PUKATAWAGAN	NELSON HOUSE	SPLIT LAKE	BROCHET
N	444	48	52	38	71	22
# LINES RESPONDED	278	24	25	26	43	11
TOTAL # LINES	876	62	46	49	64	11
SPECIES						
BADGER	N	N	N	N	N	N
BEAVER	C	C	C	A	C	C
BLACK BEAR	C	L	C	L	C	C
COYOTE	L	N	L	N	N	N
ERMINE	C	C	C	C	C	L
FISHER	L	C	C	A	C	L
RED FOX	C	C	C	C	C	C
ARCTIC FOX	N	L	N	N	L	N
LYNX	L	L	C	C	L	L
MARTEN	L	L	C	N	L	C
MINK	C	C	C	A	C	C
MUSKRAT	C	C	A	C	C	C
OTTER	C	C	C	A	C	C
RACCOON	N	N	N	N	N	N
SQUIRREL	A	A	A	A	C	C
WOLF	L	L	C	C	L	C
WOLVERINE	L	L	L	C	C	L
HARE	C	A	A	A	A	C
MICE	C	A	A	L	A	A
GROUSE	C	A	A	C	A	C

*N= Not present or extremely low, L=Low, C=Common, A=Abundant
RTL composite number of responses for areas with sufficient sample sizes.

were common furbearers and snowshoe hare (Lepus americanus), mice or small mammals and grouse or ptarmigan were common prey species although these levels varied from section to section as well.

Results for selected trapline sections with a sufficient number of responses are presented on Table 1. Beaver were abundant in Nelson House section and common in the remainder. Squirrel populations were high in Comorant, Norway House, Oxford House, Nelson House, Pukatawagan and Island Lake sections. Muskrat were high in the Pukatawagan section and mink and otter were high in the Nelson House section. Marten and mink populations were high in the Lac Brochet section. Lynx were common in Island Lake, Pukatawagan and Nelson House sections with all other areas reporting low or absent populations. Snowshoe hare populations were also high in these three areas as well as in Cormorant, Oxford House, Split Lake and Southern Indian Lake. Prey species were common in most sections but grouse or ptarmigan were high in Whiteshell, Island Lake, Oxford House, Pukatawagan, Split Lake and Limestone sections. Mice or small mammal populations were high in Cormorant, Oxford House, Pukatawagan, Split Lake, Brochet and Lac Brochet sections. Fisher were also common or low. Overall population indicies for all species in the RTL remained the same as the previous year except for snowshoe hare which was indicated as increased (Table 2).

There were however, some changes in the population levels of some species in different sections. There also were some discrepancies in the level reported this year compared to last and the indicated population status changes. These discrepancies were not significant as most were small differences such as the population level being indicated as low in 1987-88 but common in 1988-89 with no change in status being indicated. In many cases the status results were borderline, being just above or below the cut

Table 2: Trends in furbearer populations compared to 197/88 for selected trapline sections 1988/89.

Section	RTL	WHITESHELL	NORWAY HOUSE	ISLAND LAKE	TURTLE MTN.	DUCK MTN.	PORCUPINE	CORMORANT	CROSS LAKE
N	444	10	24	37	6	21	7	11	21
# LINES RESPONDED	278	7	14	21	6	17	6	8	14
TOTAL # LINES	876	25	41	42	10	28	15	10	61
SPECIES									
BADGER	0	-1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
BEAVER	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-1	0
BLACK BEAR	0	-1	-1	0	0	-1	-1	0	0
COYOTE	0	0	0	0	0	0	-1	-1	0
ERMINE	0	-1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
FISHER	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0
RED FOX	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ARCTIC FOX	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LYNX	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-1
MARTEN	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	-1	-1
MINK	0	0	0	1	-1	0	0	0	0
MUSKRAT	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	0	0
OTTER	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0
RACCOON	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SQUIRREL	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	-1
WOLF	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WOLVERINE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0
HARE	1	0	-1	1	0	1	1	1	1
MICE	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
GROUSE	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2 cont'd

Section	RTL	OXFORD HOUSE	PUKATAWAGAN	NELSON HOUSE	SPLIT LAKE	BROCHET
N	444	24	52	38	71	22
# LINES RESPONDED	278	14	25	26	43	11
TOTAL # LINES	876	41	46	49	64	11
SPECIES						
BADGER	0	0	0	0	0	0
BEAVER	0	0	0	1	1	0
BLACK BEAR	0	0	0	0	0	0
COYOTE	0	0	0	-1	0	0
ERMINE	0	0	0	0	0	0
FISHER	0	0	0	1	0	0
RED FOX	0	1	0	0	0	0
ARCTIC FOX	0	0	0	0	0	0
LYNX	0	0	0	0	-1	0
MARTEN	0	0	0	-1	0	0
MINK	0	0	0	1	0	0
MUSKRAT	0	1	1	1	0	0
OTTER	0	0	0	1	0	0
RACCOON	0	0	0	-1	0	0
SQUIRREL	0	0	1	1	0	0
WOLF	0	0	0	1	0	0
WOLVERINE	0	0	0	0	0	0
HARE	1	1	1	1	1	0
MICE	0	1	0	0	1	1
GROUSE	0	1	1	0	0	0

off point, as to change or no change.

Respondents reported 34 wolverine and 169 lynx being caught (Table 3). This is an estimate of 0.12 wolverine and 0.61 lynx being caught per line. The harvest estimates for all RTL areas in 1988-89 were 107 wolverine and 533 lynx. There were 415 lynx reported taken as of May 31, 1989, and 49 wolverine reported sold as of April 30, 1989, for the entire province. Respondents estimated 271 wolverine and 637 lynx still on their traplines or 0.97 wolverine/trapline and 2.29 lynx/trapline for the RTL area. Population estimates indicate 850 wolverine and 2008 lynx for the RTL area.

There were 31 trappers (7% of respondents or 1% of all RTL trappers) reporting they actively trapped bear and of these 5 used leghold traps, 12 used legsnares, 22 shot them and 2 used other trap types, these individuals indicating they used regular snares. This data can only be used as an indication of bear harvesters and cannot be used as fact or estimate for the whole RTL area.

DISCUSSION

The 13 sections or 12 TLO areas that were intensively sampled provided usable and important field information. Survey information and reporting of conditions on the trapline have been incorporated into the rules and conditions of RTL management since registered lines were established. Therefore, it is the trappers responsibility to provide this information on request.

Table 3: Wolverine and lynx caught by respondents and population estimates.

Trapline Sections	N	No. Lines	Wolverine Caught	No. /Line	Estimate /Section	Lynx Caught	No. /Line	Estimate /Section
WHITESHELL	10	7	0	0	0	0	.7	17
HOLE RIVER	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
BULLHEAD	2	1	0	.5	1	0	5.0	5
BLOODVEIN	5	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
LITTLE GRAND RAPIDS	4	4	0	0	0	6	0	0
NORWAY HOUSE	24	14	0	.9	37	19	4.3	175
ISLAND LAKE	37	21	1	1.3	53	27	10.4	435
TURTLE MTN.	6	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
DUCK MTN.	21	17	0	0	0	0	.2	5
PORCUPINE	7	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
CRANE RIVER	2	FUR BLOCK	0	0	0	0	0	0
WATERHEN	11	FUR BLOCK	0	0	0	0	0	0
SKOWNAN	3	FUR BLOCK	0	.3	3	1	4	4
CAMPERDUCK	2	FUR BLOCK	0	0	0	0	0	0
SHOAL RIVER	5	FUR BLOCK	0	0	0	0	0	0
CRANBERRY PORTAGE	1	1	0	2.0	42	1	8.0	168
CORMORANT	11	8	0	1.5	15	1	.8	
CROSS LAKE	21	14	8	.9	57	8	1.6	98
OXFORD HOUSE	42	24	2	.3	19	18	1.7	108
SNOW LAKE	5	3	0	0	0	3	.3	72
WABOWDEN	1	1	0	6.0	90	0	0	0
PUKATAWAGAN	52	25	6	1.2	55	26	2.2	102
NELSON HOUSE	38	26	6	5.6	274	39	9.8	480
SPLIT LAKE	71	43	6	.2	11	5	.2	10
LIMESTONE	7	4	1	.3	5	0	1.3	23
SHAMATTAWA	6	2	2	1.9	60	0	0	0
BROCHET	22	11	1	.8	9	0	.3	4
LAC BROCHET	1	FUR BLOCK	-	-	-	-	-	-
SOUTHERN INDIAN LAKE	17	8	0	1.3	83	11	1.5	96
TOTAL	444	278	34	.97	271	169	2.3	533
EST. RTL TOTAL	2890	876	34	.97	850	169	2.3	2008

This report should, however, be used as a guideline only to indicate population trends and should not be used as fact. All data were dependent upon the interpretation by the trapper, the TLO who recorded it and the biologist analyzing it without reliable verification in the field to confirm or dispute it. The study was not designed using statistical principles; therefore, statistical tests are not applicable nor valid. The data should only be used as an indicator.

Factors that may influence the results include the fact that the trappers or lines surveyed were not randomly selected. Trappers were solicited from selected communities/sections where there were TLOs to administer the questionnaire. The effort put forward by the TLO may not have facilitated the sampling of a cross-section but possibly selected more family, friends and trappers trapping close to the community. The proportion of actively trapping trappers in this sample probably varied considerably from section to section as well as from year to year.

The size of each trapline and section was variable as well as the number of trappers trapping on each line. Even though two lines or sections may be the same size, the amount of area surveyed depended upon the effective trapping area (the area that was actually travelled by the trapper and the area where traps were actually set, a small distance on each side of the trapping trails). Trappers may have been trapping only where there was an abundance of certain species thus biasing the population estimates for the line or section upward and inaccessible areas or refuges were not surveyed omitting a portion of the species population. Large areas with common to high populations of certain species were not sampled eg. Tadoule Lake and marten and Churchill and arctic fox, thus possibly keeping the population estimates below the actual. Also the east side of Lake Winnipeg

was solicited but none to few responses were received leaving a void in the data for that portion of the province.

In the end the results were dependent upon the effort put forward to survey the trapline, the effort used to solicit trappers, the honesty or skill used in assessing the population levels and effort used to fill out the form properly and completely.

The number of RTL sections with respondents increased, the total number of lines with respondents increased but the total number of respondents decreased. The decrease in the number of trappers could be partly attributed to the number of inactive trappers this past season due to poor weather conditions (extreme cold, poor snow conditions, late freeze-up etc.) and poor prices received for the pelts as well as some of the reasons described previously. It is suggested that those TLOs who were lenient in returning questionnaires be encouraged to be more diligent in completing this task and be educated in the importance of it. Perhaps hints from those TLOs who are consistently well organized would be useful.

There were stable furbearer populations overall. Most species had harvestable population levels (common) with no concerns for depletion of the stock at present. The common rating for beaver, however, contradicts the interpretation by Natural Resources staff who still generally consider the beaver population to be high at present. Wolverine will always be considered as having low population levels due to their large home ranges. Therefore, relative harvest rates should be monitored. Fisher (low) should be monitored more closely to avoid overharvest.

Estimates of harvest and population numbers compare somewhat favorably with the actual harvest and sales figures. The estimated harvest of wolverine is somewhat higher than usually found in the sales records but

it may still be accurate if private use of the fur for handicrafts and garments and the previous conditions are considered. The population estimate for this species is also higher than the previous year but there are no hard facts to prove or disprove the estimate as being correct or incorrect. The population level of wolverine may in fact be higher than was first estimated in 1987-88 or previously (R. Stardom, Head, Bioanalysis Unit, Wildlife Branch, Manitoba Dept. Natural Resources). Sales of this species have increased, they have been at all-time highs over the past ten years (Johnson 1989a) and the harvest range has expanded in the recent past which may indicate an increasing population but may also be attributed to an increased effort, increased access to its range and a changed emphasis on this species or the traps used. The estimate of lynx harvest is somewhat higher than has been recorded to date through the tagging program but when the tagging records are compared to the sales records annually there are always some pelts unaccounted for (not tagged). Based on previous years' tagging data the actual lynx harvest could be estimated as high as 452 which would make the questionnaire estimate of 533 still seem slightly high. Another reason for this high estimate may be that a majority of trappers who caught lynx may have been surveyed rather than a cross-section of trappers, in particular, if the survey was conducted when the trappers in question contacted the TLO to tag a lynx pelt. The population estimate for this species is lower than in 1987-88 at 2008 but in fact there has been a population decline in the species in the core area (Rewcastle 1988, Johnson 1989b). This data may be erroneous as there is no method to double check if the estimates are for the same areas as the previous year.

Ideally all estimates should be based on the size of the area reported on. However it is impossible to estimate these areas as they are

often portions of a particular trapline and change with each season dependent upon trapper access, habitat changes, weather conditions and animal populations. It was decided to use a trapline as the single unit of measurement even though there was great variation in the size of each trapline eg. fur blocks are treated as one vs. lines in the Whiteshell or Duck Mountain sections which are about 100km^2 in size. This may or may not have a great effect on the results. In the end the differences in sizes may cancel out or they may exaggerate the results. The effective trapping area cannot be determined without intensive on the ground sampling. For the present the trapline will be used as the basic unit as it will be more or less consistent from year to year but the gross errors that may be involved will be kept in mind. The exact same areas are not actually measured each year and this can never be guaranteed. What can be done is the same 12 or 13 areas or 15 trapline sections that provide comprehensive results can be surveyed year after year provided the TLO stations remain stable. This will provide an index of the general ups and downs in most of the RTL area, rather than an exact figure of furbearer population status and numbers throughout the province. It will be an indicator and not a factual study. This is the best that can be accomplished with the species involved and the monies, staff and time available.

In summary, such an annual survey as presented here provides useful information showing the status and trends of furbearer populations in different areas as well as providing information for management purposes at low cost. It will also encourage trappers to take a more active part in the management of their lines.

It is recommended that this project be implemented for another year to assess the reliability of the estimates over a three year period and

then be conducted on a bi-annual basis dependent upon the results.

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APPENDIX
TRAPPER'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Manitoba
Natural Resources

Trapper's Questionnaire

Name _____

Address _____

Trapline Section _____

Line No. _____

If the information on the left has changed please indicate the changes below.

_____

_____

Please answer the following questions by placing an X under the best answer for each type of animal on your trapline **THIS** season **1988-89**. All information will remain confidential and will be used to compile regional and species statistics, set seasons and develop management plans.

Do you trap muskrats **ONLY**? yes ___ no ___

Answer if you know. The animals on my trapline are:

	Abundant (High)	Common	Scarce (Low)	Not Present
Badger				
Beaver				
Black Bear				
Coyote				
Ermine				
Fisher				
Red Fox (cross & silver)				
White Fox				
Lynx				
Marten				
Mink				
Muskrat				
Otter				
Raccoon				
Red Squirrel				
Wolf				
Wolverine				
Snowshoe Hare (rabbit)				
Mice				
Grouse/ Ptarmigan				

Compared to last season there are:

	More	Same	Less
Badger			
Beaver			
Black Bear			
Coyote			
Ermine			
Fisher			
Red Fox (cross & silver)			
White Fox			
Lynx			
Marten			
Mink			
Muskrat			
Otter			
Raccoon			
Red Squirrel			
Wolf			
Wolverine			
Snowshoe Hare (rabbit)			
Mice			
Grouse/ Ptarmigan			

How many wolverine have you caught so far this season? _____

How many are still on your line (if you know)? _____

How many lynx have you caught so far this season? _____

How many lynx are still on your line (if you know)? _____

Do you trap bear? Y N

What do you use?

leghold trap legsnare shoot them

other _____